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Academic Leadership Journal

Kolb's experiential learning as a critical frame for reflective practice

Introduction

David Kolb's conception of experiential learning has informed wide-ranging studies and practices in education, business, organizational development, and leadership studies for over two decades now. His work has guided the work of trainers, teachers, and scholars, affording significant insights into both individual and organizational learning. Because deep and sustained change in human settings requires that people learn, Kolb's penetrating analysis of the complexities involved in human learning has provided clues about the notorious difficulties surrounding change in both individuals and organizations. In an era where the newest ideas tend to have special cache, Kolb's work has had remarkable staying power. Perhaps this is because his ideas have repeatedly served as a foundation for theorists and practitioners to understand and influence institutions and the people in them (Sandmire, Vroman & Sanders, 2000; Loo, 2002; Pauleen, Marshall & Ergort, 2004). In a rapidly-changing world, contemporary institutions and organizations must foster human learning. Indeed, they must be led by effective learners if they are to be relevant and enduring.

Not surprisingly, then, Kolb's theory of experiential learning not only provides opportunities for students in leadership programs to explore effective behaviors in handling the myriad tasks they will face, but it also has generative power as a reflective tool for those who teach in those programs. Others (Armstrong & McDaniel, 1986; Jackson, 2002; Holman, Pavlica & Thorp, 1997; Katz, 1990; Kayes, 2002) have argued that learning how to access all four modes and learning styles can help potential leaders become flexible and discerning in responding to organizational problems. We agree. For several years, the first author of this article has used Kolb's dimensions of experiential learning as a structuring framework for a key assignment in her Foundations of Leadership course (see appendix A).

Only recently, however, have we come to see how Kolb's conceptual framework can aid reflection on teaching. A few months before the spring semester of 2009, the two of us sat down to talk about this assignment and what it was accomplishing for students. We asked the following questions:

1. How might we use Kolb's theory of experiential learning as an interpretive framework for analyzing students' work in terms of their leadership development?
2. How might we use our analyses of student work to inform and improve our teaching?
3. What strategies might we create to promote students' growth as leaders by encouraging them to build on dominant learning modes while also strengthening less developed ones?

Thus began our collaborative study into using Kolb's theory of experiential learning as a frame for responsive teaching and reflective practice. This article offers a close description of two student papers that focus on their own leadership experiences, how we analyzed those papers, what our analyses taught us about our teaching, and how we might develop strategies to promote student learning in the future.

Kolb's Theory of Experiential Learning

Kolb's theory works on two levels: grasping and transforming experiences, and then establishing four distinct learning styles that are based on the four-mode learning cycle (see figure 1). Learning involves two dialectical modes for grasping experience or gathering information, concrete experience and abstract conceptualization, and two dialectical modes for transforming experience (making meaning of it) or processing information, reflective observation and active experimentation (Kolb, 1984, p. 41).

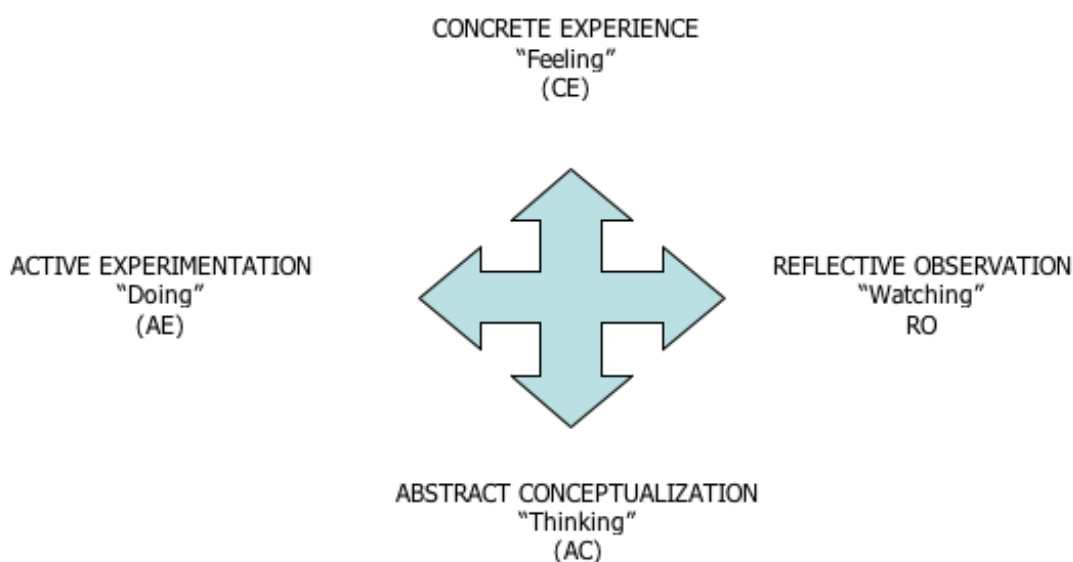


Figure 1. The Four Modes of the Learning Cycle

In our work with leadership students, we stress the importance of being conscious and deliberate about learning from experiences. As we read accounts of students' experiences, we have seen significant differences in how they learn from them. As a result, we have concluded that leadership development is a highly individual learning process. Nevertheless, these individual differences tend to fall into patterns approximating Kolb's four modes. Piaget (1969), Freire (1970), Dewey (1958) and Lewin (1951) all stressed that the heart of learning lies in the way we process experience, in particular, our critical reflections on experiences and the meanings we draw from them. Extrapolating from Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory, we posit leadership development as similarly a holistic process of adaptation to the world "whereby knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience" (Kolb, p. 41). Thus we have found Kolb's Experiential Learning Model a particularly useful heuristic for assessing not only students' present leadership approaches but also our own teaching as we strive to encourage students' further development as leaders.

An effective learner, according to Kolb, requires all four learning modes depicted in the experiential learning model. Because effective leaders must always be learning as they lead, we believe they, too,

must draw from all four modes. Over time, effective leaders must develop the capacity to choose the appropriate learning mode needed depending upon the specific situation. Concrete experience is the mode whereby leaders can consciously register and then draw on tangible, felt qualities of immediate experience, such as those arising from facilitating a meeting or giving an employee feedback. Effective leaders use abstract conceptualization when they develop conceptual understandings and create symbolic representations or when they analyze ideas and data, such as analyzing organizational data for a strategic plan and synthesizing data from a cultural climate audit.

In transforming experience into meaningful ideas, leaders can choose to reflect on their actions and carefully watch others in the process. This is reflective observation. Leaders who ask for feedback about their own performance or who deliberately work to clarify their values and priorities as they lead are operating in this reflective mode. When leaders choose active experimentation, they are choosing an action-orientation, such as convening strategy sessions to design a solution to an organizational issue or providing performance feedback to an employee. While each of these dimensions is an independent mode of grasping and transforming experience, in combination their emphasis on continuous learning in multiple dimensions creates a synergy, which can produce the highest level of cognitive stage development for dynamic and powerful leadership.

Truly effective leaders are able to rely flexibly on the four learning modes in whatever combination the situation requires of them; thus, they can call on any one of these modes as needed. Kolb (1976, 1984) theorized that while every individual utilizes each mode to some extent, he/she has a preferred mode of learning resulting from an individual tendency to learn primarily through one of the four modes. Moving leadership students beyond this preferred, often habitual, over reliance on one or two modes at the expense of the others is a major challenge in our teaching.

Methodology

As explained above, the assignment that produced these papers (see appendix B) was structured around Kolb's modes of experiential learning: feeling, watching, thinking, and doing. For purposes of this article, we chose to closely analyze two student papers. Because the papers involved writing narrative accounts of experiences in the workplace, we wanted to track how students cast themselves as protagonists (Wood, 2000) facing "something . . . that you do not totally understand, that intrigues you, that made you realize that you lack certain leadership skills" (See PAA in appendix A). In other words, we wanted to provide students the opportunity to use Kolb's framework as they reflected back on lived experiences in leadership. We wanted them to analyze and reinterpret that experience through Kolb's four modes in order to learn how they were learning and operating as leaders and to imagine ways they might learn and operate more successfully in the future. In turn, we adopted Kolb's theory as a means to assess their capacity for analyzing past experiences and for imagining new possibilities for their future work.

With these ideas in mind and after some deliberation, we chose two papers. Our considerations in making these choices were the following:

- keeping the number small enough to accommodate the length of a journal article (we opted for depth of analysis rather than breadth of student responses)
- representing a range of developmental and academic abilities

- identifying the primary mode(s) the student used to situate herself in a work dilemma

We read and reread each of these two papers, using the constant-comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) frequently used in qualitative research. Moreover, together we formed a “community of interpretation” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2007), checking and rechecking our understandings as they emerged. We parsed each paper by identifying narrative movements (Labov, 1982; Riessman, 1993): the abstract (plot overview), orientation (context of story), complicating action (crisis or conflict), evaluation (meaning), and coda (moving from narrative to present). In doing so, we tracked the abstract, orientation, and complicating action to determine which Kolb mode(s) each student used to explain her predicament and her work to resolve it. Then we searched the evaluation—or meaning making—segment of the narrative to identify whether or not the student drew from alternative modes in analyzing the experience, imagining alternative responses, and gaining insights for future work.

The words of students found in the analyses below are as they wrote them except when we had to abbreviate them in order to keep this article at a manageable length or when we needed to change names of institutions, places, and people in order to protect anonymity. Otherwise, we have included characteristic styles of expression and exact quotations, including unintentional errors in grammar and syntax.

As we labored over the papers and discussed them, we were struck with how much more deeply we were seeing students and with how frequently our conversations generated potential strategies to nurture students’ growth as leaders. Moreover, with practice, we became increasingly adept at quickly analyzing students’ stories from this perspective. What began as an extremely labor intensive exercise eventually became a manageable practice. We have explicated in detail a process that could become a regular mode of analysis over time. As with any form of expertise, at first, it feels clumsy and onerous, but over time, it becomes an internalized frame for making sense of students’ papers.

Facing Dilemmas: Students’ Stories of Leadership Conflicts

As we have explained, we chose two students’ stories on the basis of the primary mode they used to introduce and tell their stories. Each of Kolb’s modes is represented: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. The narrator/protagonists are: Ann, with concrete experience as her strength and Janet, whose strength is active experimentation. In each of these stories, the narrators/protagonists become mired in a single, preferred learning mode, which makes it difficult for her to think her way out of her dilemma. The reflective aspect of the paper provides her the opportunity to rethink the situation and imagine alternative ways of handling it. Students were more or less successful in seizing that opportunity, but we think by using Kolb’s model as a heuristic for assessing their efforts, we have discovered more effective ways to respond to their papers and help them in deepening their self reflection. A closer analysis of each story follows.

Ann’s Story: Once an AA Always an AA

Ann begins her narrative with a clear abstract (plot overview) and orientation (the context) though we have omitted some of the specifics about her workplace and title:

I started my job at a university public service organization almost nine years ago as an Administrative Assistant I (AA I) for a child care career development center. Throughout my nine years of service at

USM, I have slowly moved up in position to a PA II. The differences in these positions are twofold: 1. the duties from an AA to a PA have built on each other and more responsibility has been added. Also, because some duties have been added with the promotion to the PA level meant some AA duties were diminished from my position. 2. An AA position is considered a classified, hourly job, while a PA is an entry level professional, salary job. With my promotion to these entry level professional positions, the lower level AA position has been filled, so those duties are covered, within that job. However, what I have found is that no matter what new position I fill, I am still stuck doing some of the lower level AA duties, even though there is a new person to fill that role. Unfortunately, my motto has become: Once an AA, always an AA....

After this opening, Ann continues by explaining what she had to “go through” in order to move up to the PA II position, detailing ways she proved her independence and initiative and emphasizing the steps she had to take to “apply to a new position that was being created,” i.e., “cover letter, resume, etc. in order to prove I was capable of performing the new duties.” Listing the specifics of those new duties, she expresses once again her annoyance at being asked to do AA duties she thought she left behind. Ann’s abstract and orientation place her squarely in the concrete experience position. She is caught up in the factual details and frustrated feelings of her predicament. Her story moves forward with the complicating action or conflict:

The problem I started to see, after all my work of proving myself and moving through the levels was that my coworkers didn’t realize the significance of my job changes. Coworkers continued to ask me to do tasks that were no longer my responsibility and started to email me and the new AA about tasks and say “I’m not sure who to ask, but...” There seemed to be no distinction of who did what and no respect for the different jobs we were doing. I felt horrible that I wasn’t recognized for my accomplishments . . .”

After an extended period of feeling stuck in the situation, Ann leaps to into taking action but without conscious reflection on or abstract analysis of her situation:

I did go to my supervisor at the time and actually no matter whom I went to on the team the response was the same: “Well, you are so good at what you do, that’s why people ask you – because you know how to do it! Just think about it as a compliment and ‘go forth and do good things!’” But, how could I ‘go forth and do good things’ when I was being asked to do the wrong things and essentially doing more than I should have and also my supervisors weren’t listening to me or understanding what I was trying to tell them?

Despite mounting resentment, Ann seems stuck in a cycle of repetitive and negative concrete experiences when she feels disrespected. There is no evidence that she considers others’ perspectives, group dynamics, the political situation, or leadership issues:

This kind of thing went on for a few years until it got better last year with my newest and latest supervisor. But, I say it got better, it didn’t get solved! To this day, I am still randomly asked to do things I feel I shouldn’t be doing –and according to my job description, I shouldn’t be doing them!

With the arrival of the new supervisor, Ann’s daily, concrete experiences shift only slightly because of the influence of the new supervisor to whom she cedes responsibility for the situation:

My supervisor does listen to me and she does understand. She has even made some attempts to

email staff about clarification of duties between the two jobs – AA II and PA II – and who should go to whom for what and when! But, this problem has also spilled over into the larger [organization] and not just my project. Others in the office, whom I do not work with directly at all, randomly come to me with questions I feel they should be asking their own AA's.

As Ann perceived the problem getting bigger, her daily frustrations intensified until finally she had had enough, "For the first time ever, I recently said 'No, I'm sorry, but I don't have time to help you. Maybe Mary can help you?'" Despite the difficulty of challenging this colleague, it brought Ann a measure of satisfaction: "It was awkward and uncomfortable for me, but I did it! I stood up for myself . . ."

Because the PAA required Ann to reflect on the situation retrospectively, she had a chance to consider that her own inaction might have perpetuated the problem: "I wonder if part of the problem is me not standing up for myself and just plain old saying, 'No, I'm sorry but I don't do that anymore, you can go to Kathy and she will help you!'" Having studied theories regarding leadership and organizations in her undergraduate program, she attempts in her paper to use abstract concepts and systems thinking to analyze the problem:

Should my supervisors be taking on more of a role to figure this out and help distinguish our two jobs and clarify them with project staff (like my supervisor has tried) and also other office staff? Are staff in my office taking the convenient route for them and going to me because I used to do certain tasks and they know I know how to do them? Is it a leadership problem for me? Should I be helping to distinguish my role within the project and greater office?

At this point, Ann reflects again on her inaction. Claiming that her supervisor wants to give her yet another promotion, she wonders if she should just look forward to the next job and quit bothering with making job responsibilities clearer. And yet, her inaction keeps haunting her: "BUT, do I really want to continue on this way and wait for things to happen naturally? So, far there hasn't been any luck with that!" She muses, "Why am I perceived as the all around, dependable, 'go to' person? Why am I having a problem with people continuing to see me this way, when there is a new 'go to' person to take my place?"

These thoughts, then, trigger in her a resolve to "know myself better," and she reflects on her Myers Briggs type, claiming that the qualities ascribed to ISTJs are "all ideal characteristics to have in both the AA and PA positions," her former and her present positions. She, then, cites a Myers Briggs Type Indicator source that claims ISTJ leaders are particularly skillful at clarifying job responsibilities, tasks, and expectations. She writes, "Clearly, I need to take a lead in clarifying roles, but I also need to make sure people know I can still be available should Kathy or somebody else not be." On the one hand, Ann is proud of the very qualities in herself that lead others to think of her as a "go to" person. Moreover, she sees how these qualities will be useful in a leadership position. And yet, she is still unhappy with her co-workers not being able to distinguish between her role as a PA and her colleague's role as an AA. She tries using organizational theory to make sense of things: "These unclear roles of the AA and PA positions can be described as 'role ambiguity' or 'unclear expectations,' . . . caused by a lack of clarity in the role itself, a lack of consensus within the group regarding behaviors associated with the role, or the individual role taker's uncertainty with regard to the types of behaviors expected of them (Forsyth, 2006, p. 184)."

Ann persists in seeing the problem as a matter of role clarification. She insists that roles and duties

need to be clarified and delineated, but she also wonders if it will make a difference in what her co-workers ask of her and in how they see her role in the organization. Because she perseverates in thinking about job descriptions, she seems to miss altogether her clear need for recognition from her co-workers. After all, she had worked hard for her promotion. She wanted her co-workers to see her and treat her differently as a result—to recognize the rise in her status. The subtext of her story is clearly a quest for respect.

Ann ends her paper by reflecting on her usual habit of avoiding conflict and her ability in this instance to break that habit and speak up: “Normally, I would have avoided any type of conflict or confrontation . . . But, I took a risk and said it. Surprisingly, it worked! I think this was a starting point or turning point for me.” She goes on to plan a two-step solution: 1) support her supervisor in clarifying AA and PA roles and making sure job descriptions are disseminated, and 2) “work on my assertiveness and fear of conflict to overcome those issues and positively approach any role ambiguity situations . . .” Toward the end of the paper, she explains her ambition is to become “a supervisor myself.” This explains a lot about her continuing distress. As she puts it, she needs her “co-workers to see that I am moving on from my prior AA duties/role.” While she confesses that the perceptions of others matter to her, she also insists that this is only part of the picture. She writes that she must also come to grips with her own self perception of who she is and what she has to offer. Then in the last paragraphs, she takes a sudden turn, alluding to the work of Bradford and Cohen (1998): “I need to move beyond the idea of the hierarchical institution and a vertical heroic leadership pattern to a shared leadership capacity.” Reflecting further, she writes,

I don’t know how many times I have thought ‘that’s not my job’ when approached about something I should no longer be doing! But, by changing my mindset to that of the greater group, I can change and really focus on what is important. I can start doing this even though I am not in a formal supervisory or leadership role...yet!...I won’t always be an AA!”

Reflections on Ann’s Story

Ann has a strong affinity for the details and routines of her daily work life, which she attends to with a steady calm and competence. She attends to her experiences with great specificity and seems to immerse herself in present realities. All of these qualities are the hallmarks of concrete experience. She is less proficient, however, in analyzing unfolding realities, seeing patterns in them, and using interpretive categories or theories to make alternative sense of these realities and see possibilities for changing their direction. Perhaps to a lesser degree than her capacity for attending to concrete experience, Ann is also capable of stepping back and watching events as they unfold, trying her best to observe nuances in what occurs around her. In the situation she describes in her story, however, Ann’s reflective observations tend to yield few alternative interpretations of what is happening around her. She tends to carefully observe only those aspects of events that confirm her original interpretations.

Ann does demonstrate one striking example of taking experimental action when she firmly explains to a coworker that a request made of her does not fall in her job description. This is uncharacteristic of Ann’s usual way of dealing with things, and although it gives her temporary satisfaction, she quickly returns to her old habits of feeling hurt and doing little about it.

The PAA works especially well for Ann in that it nudges her to use abstract conceptualization to make new sense of her dilemma. Using theory, Ann realizes that she wants to develop new interpretive

frames for looking at her work life, moving out of hierarchical notions of power and authority and toward more democratic, mission-driven conceptions of structuring organizations. This is a profound shift.

Janet's Story: Culture Shock

As is the case with most storytellers, Janet begins her account with an abstract (plot overview) and orientation (the context); however, we have excluded specifics about her workplace and title to maintain confidentiality:

I have worked in healthcare for over twenty years and have weathered many exhausting trials to test my patience, nursing skills, and leadership skills. Out of that wide array of failures there is one that nags at me and to a certain extent still affects me today. It is a conflict between myself and one department head at the company I work for. He criticized and disapproved of my decision to hire an outside consultant to conduct a root-cause analysis, which I chose to do after a disastrous event occurred at the company.

Having laid out this conflict, Janet goes on to describe a batch of disapproving reactions from her new team members when they discover she had decided to hire a consultant. She preempts the negativity by explaining her *modus operandi*: "When a major event happens like this, the standard procedure that I have always done is to do a 'root-cause' analysis. What was the root cause of the issue? What factors led to this event?" Then, she somewhat prematurely seeks to overcome her perceived lack of skill and confidence by seeking outside help to answer the questions, which she has posed. Janet says,

Since I was not the most skilled at doing a root cause, I brought in an outside consultant to be the leading expert. My reasoning was that she would lend credibility to the process, and I would establish an ethos as a capable manager and leader who was not afraid to ask for help to do what was right.

Interestingly, she makes the decision to hire an outside consultant based on her assumptions about how others would react to her decision, and she does so incorrectly given her colleagues' reactions. Clearly, she was leaning heavily on active experimentation, her strongest mode for learning, in order to manage and to resolve an organizational dysfunction.

Janet subsequently acknowledges that this was the first time that anyone had brought to the organization an outside consultant: "the facility where I was working had never done a root-cause analysis, and I believed that it would be beneficial for them to see the entire process with the help of an expert." Apparently, Janet had jumped into action without the needed reflection and analysis to understand the needs of the situation in her new culture. Once again relying upon active experimentation, Janet neglected to reflect on the meaning and possible reactions from other employees in bringing in an outside consultant. Rather than first collecting information to test perceptions for acceptance of a new practice, Janet gathered the department heads together with the consultant. She writes in her paper, "the event was a disaster."

She elaborates on her story by describing the defensiveness of one team member. If I suggested that the door system was faulty, he would angrily retort that my staff were poorly trained to keep track of the residents... calling her 'stupid' (the consultant) and 'incompetent'... Throughout the whole meeting he was forceful and borderline belligerent. He acted like he felt like he was being attacked. I was humiliated and dumbstruck." Here, Janet reflects on the details of her negative experience without

deeper analysis. Rather, she continues to reflect on the experience by thinking primarily about her antagonists' reactions, based on her unexplored assumptions about him. She fails to question her own actions from a more systemic and conceptual perspective. She writes,

In looking back at this event, I have tried to place myself in this man's shoes. Did he feel threatened by me? While I tried to come off as impartial, I may have appeared prejudiced because my first reaction was to defend the staff. Did he feel alienated? I was new to the job, and thus had not developed a strong reputation in this workplace. They did not know how I worked under pressure, and that unknown variable may have scared this gentleman.

In her Reflective Observation mode, Janet seeks to understand the triggers for others' reactions while staying immersed in her own blind spots about how others might perceive or misinterpret her actions.

In further reflection, Janet attempts to conceptualize the situation in a larger context when she states that,

Months later, I understand it (her workplace) to be a culture where in the case of a problem, someone is often blamed. However, that person who receives full blame for the mistake is pardoned and reaccepted into the workplace immediately... It goes against everything I have been taught, which includes the principle that it's not usually one person's fault, but rather a plethora of factors that contributed to the issue.

She attempts to depersonalize the conflict in acknowledging, "This man and I had completely different goals." Then Janet deduces that, "His was probably trying to find someone to blame while mine was to change a system that I believed was faulty." She further notes that while she continues to work with this employee, they continue to have conflicts with one another. She attempts to articulate the "root cause" for these conflicts.

"To this day, I still have conflicts with him. I feel the issues before me are two fold: 1) I did not understand the organizational culture of the company and 2) We had differing expectations of the type of leadership at this company, which led to conflict."

In the above passage, Janet moves to an abstract conceptualization mode where she attempts to understand the issue from a detached perspective.

She continues by analyzing her conflict in a way that incorporates her understanding of organizational culture.

The first step to understanding and working through this problem is to understand the culture of my workplace. Clappitt says that corporate culture is "the underlying belief and value structure of an organization collectively shared by the employees and symbolically expressed in a variety of overt and subtle ways." (2005, p. 47)

In reflections on the situation, Janet concludes that she missed an important opportunity to effect change by neglecting a crucial change principle – understanding the present belief system and norms of the organization one wishes to change: "Part of the reason I was shocked by the man's reaction to my bringing in an expert, was because I did not fully understand the culture of the company."

Clearly in the conceptualizing mode, Janet then leaps to yet another “root cause” for the conflict with her department head.

There was a lot of conflict present during the meeting with the expert. Task and role-related conflicts are normal and healthy for a team (Bradford & Cohen, 1998) but the personal-related conflicts that were present during the meeting needed to be identified and halted before they spiraled out of control... To make matters worse, the situation escalated out of control because the department head seemed to have lost his temper. Forsyth asserts that “few people can remain calm and collected in a conflict” (2006, p.434) and perhaps an effective way to have mediated the situation was to have calmed the tempers. I feel like one of the roots of this conflict stems from a disagreement about leadership dynamics.

Janet concludes that her orientation to problem solving is different from the norm in the new organization she now works.

My learning as a leader suggested just the opposite of this; that no one person is to blame and all the factors leading up to the disaster must be analyzed and changed. I also did not understand another part of this company’s culture. After the person who was blamed was chastised severely, he or she was soon forgiven and welcomed back into the organization as if nothing had happened.

Janet then attempts to integrate the behavior patterns she astutely observes into a conceptual understanding.

Perhaps the reason for this was the cohesiveness, or unity, within the organization. Forsyth describes group cohesion using Festinger and his colleagues’ (Festinger, Schacter, & Back, 1950, p. 164) phrase: “the total field of forces which act on members to remain in the group” (2006, p.137). The individual in the team was punished for messing up (even though the problem was not exclusively his or her fault) but he or she stays in the group. The group strives for unity, or perhaps conflict avoidance, so they accept the other member back.

Janet is “grasping experience” as she perceives her new membership and position in the organization.

The group was extremely cohesive, but I was not counted among them yet. I was formally in the group, but I was the minority, and thus lacked the influence that the majority had (Forsyth, 2006).

Given her status within her new group, Janet reached for an action that would transform her experience and provide a tangible solution to reduce her perceived conflict in an uncomfortable situation, and later offers details of how she might act (active experimentation) on her ideas of “shared leadership” and to find greater respect within her group. She writes, “Perhaps the best way to increase my respect within the group was to aim for a structure of shared leadership and find compromise as my role as a leader...”

Through her experiences, she recognizes that,

... they were not quite at the level of shared leadership. Pearce & Conger define shared leadership as ‘a collaborative, emergent process of group interaction in which members engage in peer leadership while working together’ (2003, p.53). Both the department heads and myself thought we were working within the shared leadership idea.

Yet, how does Janet know that the department heads thought they were acting out of shared leadership? Without offering evidence to confirm her hypothesis, Janet acted on a mere assumption that the concept of shared leadership existed with her team members. With the benefit of hindsight, aided by conceptual knowledge and the reflective writing opportunity this assignment afforded her, she reviews her rationale for her actions and then proposes an alternative to the path she had taken:

I brought in an expert to discuss the issues and work with everyone towards ensuring the disaster never happened again, and my reasoning was to empower the team to work with an expert and not exclusively me. The man I fought with thought I was violating the concept of shared leadership because I did not consult the group before I acted. Post- heroic leadership suggests that the leader consults the group before making major decision (1998, Bradford & Cohen)... The decision was mine, but the best way to ensure conflict does not spiral out of control again was to work with the department heads, especially with the one man, to establish a mutual vision (1998, Bradford & Cohen) of my expectations towards them, and their expectations of me.

In her conclusion, Janet integrates the threads of her conflict with her team and lays out a plan of action, which she sees as beneficial for both her and for the organization.

The intense conflict between the department head and myself was a learning experience....Even though I tend to be conflict avoidant, I'm starting to see the wisdom in Power Up's words, "conflict is both inevitable and healthy....It should be embraced, not avoided or suppressed....Differing views have to be raised, defended, and questioned" (Bradford & Cohen, 1998, p.275)... The lessons I can take from this experience can help me grow and learn how to be a better leader in this organization, other places I may work, and in my own personal life.

Reflections on Janet's Story

Janet's account of her conflict at work shows her to be fairly well rounded in her modes for learning but strongest in active experimentation. She acknowledges her struggle for analysis (AC) and her need to be more deeply reflective (RO) about her circumstances before initiating a course of action (AE). Janet has an affinity for conceptualizing an issue (AC) and taking strong initiative to remedy an issue through action planning (AE). She is less proficient, however, in gathering information and reflecting on the responses and behavior, both verbal and non verbal, from others. Janet acknowledges a key contributing issue to the conflict only after being confronted directly and blatantly during a meeting.

The PAA provided Janet with the opportunity to write a full account of her experience, unfold her central dilemmas, reflect upon them, and then consider different perspectives while also acknowledging her own weaknesses as a leader in this situation. With an opportunity to spend some time in reflection and analysis, she could use her strength of conceptualization to make new sense of what she had experienced and how she might change her behavior if ever again confronted with such a situation. Of the four learning modes, however, her paper illustrates that active experimentation is Janet's weakest one.

Furthering leadership learning capabilities for Ann and Janet

As teachers, we see clear openings for helping Janet and Ann to develop their weaker areas: active

experimentation and reflective observation for Janet and abstract conceptualization and active experimentation for Ann. For both, this could be accomplished by asking them to think about a series of reflective questions about each of their dilemmas and also by instituting a follow up exercise to the PAA that would require them to design an improvement strategy for a present issue or opportunity. For instance, we might ask Ann:

- What “lessons” might be drawn from your experience that leaders, AAs, and others might see as useful guides for their work? (This would help Ann to recognize the applicability of abstracting from concrete experience inductive theories that can be used subsequently deductively (abstract conceptualization))
- Imagine you are mentoring a PA, recently promoted from an AA position. In your role as a supervisor, you believe she is going through a similar experience to the one you have described. What advice would you give her about specific actions she could take to improve her situation? (active experimentation)

For Janet, we could ask:

What “lessons” might be drawn from your experience that could be taken by other newly hired managers in leadership positions? Imagine you are mentoring a new employee who is completely new to your organization. In your role as their supervisor, you believe she is going through a similar experience to the one you have described. What advice would you give her about specific actions she could take to improve her situation (active experimentation)? This would help Janet to recognize the importance of deducing from theories (abstract conceptualization) specific behaviors that can be used (active experimentation) to manage difficult situations.

In developing follow up questions and assignments, we would be asking students to be particularly mindful about building their learning leadership strengths while working on their weaknesses. They might also develop an intervention for their workplaces using all dimensions of experiential learning, including those that they tended to neglect. Such guidance would further students’ firsthand experience of the lifelong learning process and help them develop their own holistic learning process for improving their leadership capabilities.

Conclusion

Leadership students need support so they may feel recognized and affirmed for their strengths and coached in developing those capabilities while learning new ways to strengthen their weaker modes of learning. The PAA creates a window through which we can see more deeply and “between the lines” the gifts and struggles that our students bring with them to our classes. Kolb’s theory of experiential learning as an interpretive framework for analyzing students’ work in terms of their leadership potential made us much more deliberate as teachers, about analyzing our students’ strengths and weaknesses. We were able to see the collective strengths and weaknesses of our students and provide useful feedback to them while honoring their strengths and nudging them to develop their weaknesses. Leadership is fueled by action, but action is fueled by our internal feelings about ourselves and others in the world. What we do as teachers can either reinforce those perceptions or open up new avenues for growth. Towards this end, and as a result of the Personal Application Assignment, we were able to develop assignments more tailored to our students’ individual leadership development needs.

As teachers, utilizing Kolb's theory of experiential learning as an interpretive framework for analyzing students' work in terms of their leadership potential made us conscious of our own strengths and weaknesses as experiential learners. Thus we came to understand who we ourselves are as learners and then extrapolate from that as teachers what we can do to improve our teaching. For example, rather than dwell on the theoretical, we could engage in greater reflection about the here and now experience itself in the classroom. Or, rather than getting stuck in the conflict of the human dilemma being described by a student, seek ways to conceptualize for deeper learning and challenging assumptions or mental models, or form a plan of action to manage such dilemmas in the future. Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory provides us with a framework for asking ourselves pertinent questions to increase our depth of learning as teachers and guide our students to such discovery. Through the self assessment of all four experiential modes of learning leadership, we were able to tailor follow up assignments for our students about areas they needed to grow. We wanted to give feedback to students about their strengths, but also about their weaknesses asking them to be quite deliberate, mindful, and with an analytic edge that they may not otherwise have had without this assignment. For both teachers and students, then, the Personal Application Assignment fosters reflective practice, offering an opportunity to peel back the layers of lived experiences to reveal needs, motivations, strengths, and weaknesses in leadership situations.

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Appendix A Personal Application Assignment (PAA) Structure

This essay assignment is structured as a way for you to consolidate insights gleaned from experiential learning where each step outlined below guides you through the Cycle of Learning. In the PAA, you are asked to focus on an experience you had at school, in your group or at work that is of deep personal significance. Choose an experience about which you are motivated to learn more; that is, there was something about it that you do not totally understand, that intrigues you, that made you realize that you lack certain leadership skills, or that was problematic or significant for you. It may have been an academic or a non-formal educational experience (e.g., a simulation in our class with your group, on-the-job training, a performance appraisal, coaching or other leadership experience.).

Parts I and II of the PAA is a combined 5 page integrative paper, which explores the questions outlined below. The questions are there to guide you. Use them, and others as you wish. Your grade will be based on your critical thinking skills, integration of the four modes as well as your writing skills as outlined on the Criteria for Evaluating Writing Handout. What follows outlines the Personal Application Assignment for you.

PART I (sections A and B roughly 2 pages)

A. Concrete Experience

The PAA is most effective when the Concrete Experience (actual experience) chosen has some personal significance for you. In this part of the paper, you are to briefly describe the experience and the feelings, thoughts, and perceptions that arose during the experience. CE experience has an

objective and a subjective component. The objective component comprises the facts of the experience without an attempt to analyze their content. The subjective component comprises the personal experience of the event, composed of feelings, perceptions, and thoughts.

To begin, replay the experience in your mind, then report what you saw, heard, felt, and thought, and what you heard and saw others doing. Do not present detailed mechanics of the experience, unless critical to the paper, and do not report feelings and thoughts experienced after the experience. This retrospection will occur in the Reflective Observation section.

Questions to consider:

1. What was your experience (who, what, when, where, how)?
2. What were your feelings, perceptions, and thoughts that occurred during (not after) the experience? What did others seem to be feeling?

B. Reflective Observation

In this next section you are to ask yourself, “What did I observe in the experience, and what possible meanings could these observations have? Gather as many observations as possible by observing the experience from different points of view. The main skill for you to hone is perspective taking, or re-framing—looking at the experience and trying to describe it from difference perspectives. How would the other agents in the situation view it, and what would it mean to them? What would an objective observer have seen and heard? What would the situation have meant to the participants at a younger age? To their mothers or fathers? Reflect on these observations to discover the personal meaning of the situation for you. I encourage you (1) to discuss the experience with others to gain their views and clarify perceptions, and (2) to “unhook” yourself from the experience and meditate about it in a relaxed atmosphere. Mull over these observations until your personal meaning becomes clear.

Questions to consider:

1. Looking back at the experience, what were the perspectives of the key actors (including you)?
2. Why do you think the people involved (including you) behaved as they did?

PART II (sections c and d roughly 2-3 pages to be integrated with PART I for your Final Paper)

C. Abstract Conceptualization

Now it's time to relate the material covered in this class from your reading and lectures to the experience you wrote about. This section enables you to demonstrate your conceptual ability to understand abstract material through your experience. Review the theoretical material we have covered in this course and identify several concepts or theories that tie into your experience. The theory should provide insight into your experience. Does the experience support or refute the theory? Discuss in some detail how the concepts and theories relate to your experience. You can either identify the theoretical concepts first and then use the experience to illustrate them, or you can search out those

concepts that apply to the experience.

Questions to consider:

1. What specific concepts, theories and research from the assigned readings or lectures can you relate to your experience? How do they apply?

D. Active Experimentation

Based on the experience you've reported, what action might you take to make you even more effective in future experiences? You are now to consider how you will behave in the future as a result of this experience. How can concepts from the preceding phase be tested? Future action must be based on the experience reported in Concrete Experience. Elaborate in detail how you would implement these ideas, being careful to be specific and thorough. Depending upon the complexity of the ideas, you should present one to three carefully thought-out future plans.

At this juncture, project an experience in which you can envision implementing these ideas, and elaborate on that experience to demonstrate your implementation strategy. Does this model exist currently (home, work, school)? Do you need a support system to make it happen? Someone to "contract" with? What will it be like to accomplish your plan?

Example:

Questions to consider:

1. What did I learn from this experience? Have I been forced to reexamine previously held views, values or opinions? How have my views, perceptions or beliefs changed? What did I know "for sure" that just isn't so for me now?

2. What did I learn about myself? How can I apply something I have learned to my professional life?

3. What action steps will I take to be more effective in the future?

4. What are some theories, ideas or unresolved questions that I'd like to explore further? Have I been really turned on to something about which I never really thought much before? What would I like to learn more about?

E. Integration and Synthesis

The best PAA does not address these four points mechanically. You will want to integrate the four learning perspectives in a presentation that richly documents a unique learning experience. The well-written PAA has a focal issue and a story threading through the paper. The notion of synergy applies here: The whole is (or should be) greater than the sum of its parts.

ELEMENTS OF THE PAA

-Details of the experience (objective)

-Thoughts, feelings and perceptions

during the experience (subjective)

Appendix B Ann and Janet's Personal Application Papers

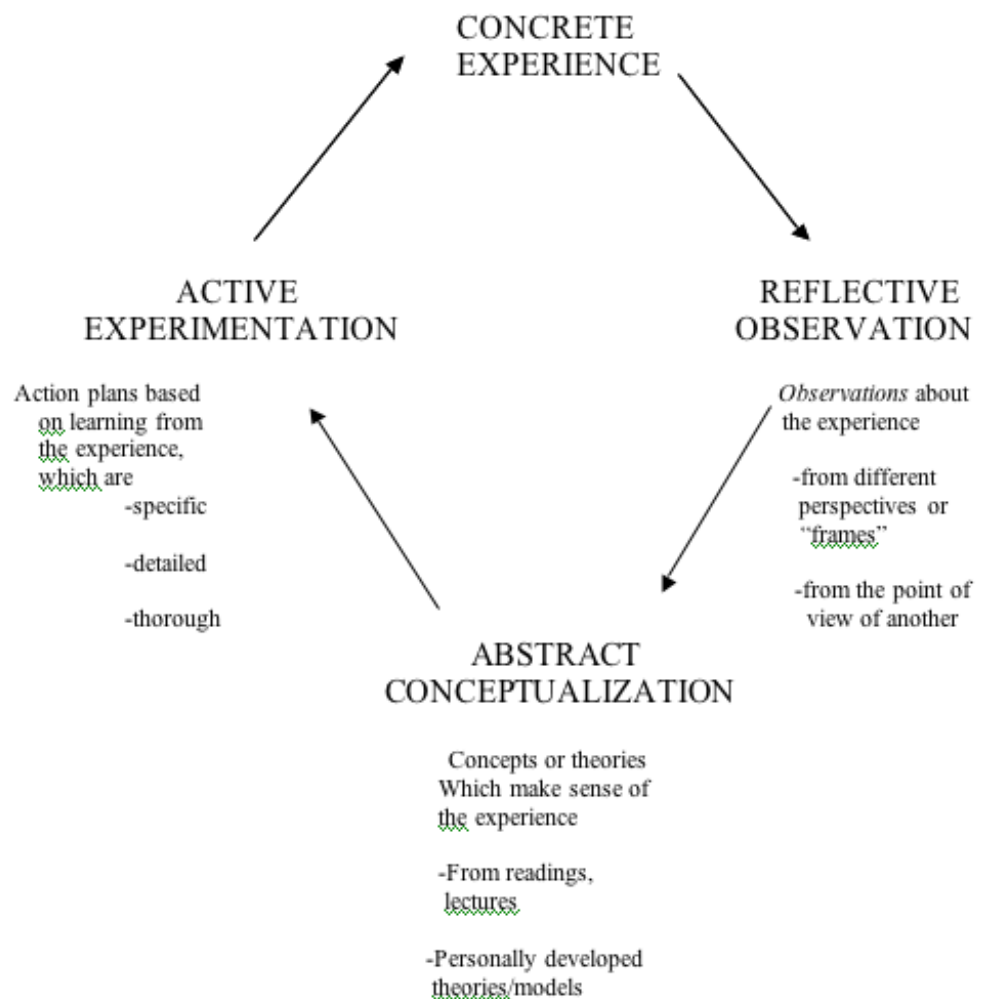
Ann

Once an AA, Always an AA

I started my job at the Muskie School of Public Service/USM almost nine years ago as an Administrative Assistant I (AA I) for a child care career development center within the Institute for Child & Family Policy. Throughout my nine years of service at USM, I have slowly moved up in position to an AAll, a Project Assistant I (PA I), and now a PA II. The differences in these positions are twofold: 1. the duties from an AA to a PA have built on each other and more responsibility has been

added. Also, because some duties have been added with the promotion to the PA level meant some AA duties were diminished from my position. 2. An AA position is considered a classified, hourly job, while a PA is an entry level professional, salary job. With my promotion to these entry level professional positions, the lower level AA position has been filled, so those duties are covered, within that job. However, what I have found is that no matter what new position I fill, I am still stuck doing some of the lower level AA duties, even though there is a new person to fill that role. Unfortunately, my motto has become: Once an AA, always an AA...

As an AA (I or II), I have basically been the hub of organization and detail for the career development center. In order to move from AA I to II, I had to go through a desk audit and prove that I was working independently and at a higher level on specific tasks, such as planning all meetings, conferences, events and monitoring the scholarship program and all budgets. In order to move from an AA II to a PA I, I had to actually apply to a new position that was created, because I was moving from a classified to a professional position. I submitted my cover letter, resume, etc. in order to prove I was capable of performing the new duties of creating agendas and taking minutes for meetings, completely taking over all conferences and events and creating/editing the project website and helping out with our child care



Adapted from Osland et al. (2007)

registry program. Tasks such as the scholarship program, budgets, and other tasks – copying, faxing, filing, etc. were kept with the AA job.

The problem I started to see, after all my work of proving myself and moving through the levels was that my coworkers didn't realize the significance of my job changes. Coworkers continued to ask me to do tasks that were no longer my responsibility and started to email me and the new AA about tasks and say "I'm not sure who to ask, but..." There seemed to be no distinction of who did what and no respect for the different jobs we were doing. I felt horrible that I wasn't recognized for my accomplishments and new tasks and also horrible for the new AA who wasn't recognized for her separate, but important tasks – especially when there was a difference in how we were classified and paid by USM. I did go to my supervisor at the time (I have had three in the past 5 years) and actually no matter whom I went to on the team the response was the same: "Well, you are so good at what you do, that's why people ask you – because you know how to do it! Just think about it as a compliment and 'go forth and do good things!'" But, how could I 'go forth and do good things' when I was being asked to do the wrong things and essentially doing more than I should have and also my supervisors weren't listening to me or understanding what I was trying to tell them?

This kind of thing went on for a few years until it got better last year with my newest and latest supervisor. But, I say it got better, it didn't get solved! To this day, I am still randomly asked to do things I feel I shouldn't be doing –and according to my job description, I shouldn't be doing them! My supervisor does listen to me and she does understand. She has even made some attempts to email staff about clarification of duties between the two jobs – AA II and PA II – and who should go to whom for what and when! But, this problem has also spilled over into the larger institute and not just my project. Others in the office, whom I do not work with directly at all, randomly come to me with questions I feel they should be asking their own AA's. To me, it would feel better if they were to ask their support staff to help them and then if the support staff can't help them or have questions, THEN they can come to me! For the first time ever, I recently said "No, I'm sorry, but I don't have time to help you. Maybe Mary can help you?" It was awkward and uncomfortable for me, but I did it! I stood up for myself instead of just "going forth and doing good things" and not questioning!

In retrospection, I wonder if part of the problem is me not standing up for myself and just plain old saying "No, I'm sorry but I don't do that anymore, you can go to Kathy and she will help you!" or if it's a leadership problem within my project? Should my supervisors be taking on more of a role to figure this out and help distinguish our two jobs and clarify them with project staff (like my supervisor has tried) and also other office staff? Are staff in my office taking the convenient route for them and going to me because I used to do certain tasks and they know I know how to do them, instead of checking in with their own staff and maybe teaching them – because it might be more work for them? Is it a leadership problem for me? Should I be helping to distinguish my role within the project and greater office? To further add to this, my supervisor and I have discussed that I am ready for a more challenging role all together and its time I move up even further. We just have to find that right opportunity for me to do so. At least she is on the lookout! But, until then...once an AA, always an AA...

BUT, do I really want to continue on this way and wait for things to happen naturally? So, far there hasn't been any luck with that! I think the first thing I need to do is really look at who I am and how I fit in with the project I work with. Why am I perceived as the all around, dependable, "go to" person? Why am I having a problem with people continuing to see me this way, when there is a new "go to" person to take my

place? After taking the Introduction to Type and Teams with the MBTI Form M Self-Scorable tool, I realized that I may always be the “go to” person! My results showed that I am an ISTJ, or Introvert, Sensing, Thinking, Judging type. Some of the characteristics frequently associated with this type are: “thoroughness and dependability, practical, realistic, responsible, and take pleasure in making everything orderly and organized.” (Briggs & Myers, 1998). These are all ideal characteristics to have in both the AA and PA positions, especially the AA position. I do believe my co-workers see me in this way. However, Kathy, the current AA, also holds most, if not all, of these characteristics! I think part of the problem is my longevity in the office and within my project. I need to find some way to make things clear to the other staff that even though I might have always been the “go to” person, I may not always be the right person to go to! Interestingly, some characteristics of ISTJs, within a leadership capacity, are “clarifying roles, tasks, and expectations” and “being a port in a storm; always there, always dependable” (Hirsh et al, 2003, p. 13). Clearly, I need to take a lead in clarifying roles, but I also need to make sure people know I can still be available should Kathy or somebody else not be.

These unclear roles of the AA and PA positions can be described as “role ambiguity” or “unclear expectations about the behaviors to be performed by an individual occupying a particular position within the group, caused by a lack of clarity in the role itself, a lack of consensus within the group regarding behaviors associated with the role, or the individual role taker’s uncertainty with regard to the types of behaviors expected of them.” (Forsyth, 2006, p. 184). Further, Forsyth explains that to solve this role ambiguity, “one solution involves making role requirements explicit: Managers should write job descriptions for each role within the organization and provide employees with feedback about the behaviors expected of them,” (Forsyth, 2006, p. 186). I agree this would definitely help clarify roles, but it doesn’t mean this clarification would be communicated to the right people who would need to hear it – in my case anyway. That is why I feel it is my responsibility at this point to take action. Management can definitely help with clarification, but I believe this is more of a leadership issue on my part.

Some other characteristics of ISTJs, specifically Introverts, are: “prefer reflection over action, prefer written communication, and stay in the background” and “favor a calm atmosphere, find too much interaction stressful.” (Hirsh et al, 2003, pp. 3 & 5). This makes sense as I prefer to remain calm, quiet and reserved and favor peace over conflict! Therefore, it is difficult for me to bring up these issues of role ambiguity with my co-workers. It took all I could manage to say “No, I’m sorry, but I don’t have time to help you. Maybe Mary can help you?” instead of biting my tongue, helping my co-worker, and thinking “go forth and do good things!” Normally, I would have avoided any type of conflict or confrontation and would have just gone forth and done good things. But, I took a risk and said it. Surprisingly, it worked! I think this was a starting point or turning point for me. It proved that I could speak up and say what I needed to say about the situation and have it be OK.

I see the immediate solution to my problem as twofold: 1. I can work with my supervisor and ask her to clearly write out the task role expectations for the two positions, AA II and PAII, and submit them to my other co-workers on the project team for their clarification; and, more importantly, 2. I can work on my assertiveness and fear of conflict to overcome those issues and positively approach any role ambiguity situations hands-on when they should arise within my project or with other office staff. I believe these two solutions will help solve the problem in the short term and day to day interactions, however, I also believe there may be more I can do to establish my current role and to also help expand my role as a leader within my office. If I am to eventually take on more responsibility and someday become a supervisor myself, it may also help other co-workers see that I am moving on from my prior AA

duties/role. Perhaps my focus needs to change from looking at how I am perceived by others with respect to my tasks, but to how I am perceived by myself with respect to how I contribute to the project team and the greater vision of the Institute or the Muskie School/USM. To do this, I need to do as Bradford and Cohen suggest and “Power Up!” I need to move beyond the idea of the hierarchical institution and a vertical heroic leadership pattern to a shared leadership capacity.

Within this new capacity or mind-set, I can work to establish new shared responsibilities with my teammates and co-workers and contribute to the shared vision and mutual influence (Bradford & Cohen, 1998, pp. 52-53). Bradford and Cohen (1998) state “Sharing responsibility for management functions such as delegating, coordinating, controlling, evaluating, and staffing means that team members can not ignore important unit problems or discrepancies between the leader’s words and actions by saying ‘that’s not my job.’ Everything affecting unit success is everyone’s job.” (p. 57). I don’t know how many times I have thought “that’s not my job” when approached about something I should no longer be doing! But, by changing my mindset to that of the greater group, I can change and really focus on what is important. I can start doing this even though I am not in a formal supervisory or leadership role...yet! As long as I don’t worry about being perceived as an AA (instead of a PA) and instead put my focus on the team (and I also speak up when I need to address a situation)...I won’t always be an AA! Then, maybe I really can “go forth and do good things!”

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Janet

Culture Shock

1. I have worked in healthcare for over twenty years and have weathered many exhausting trials to test my patience, nursing skills, and leadership skills. Out of that wide array of failures there is one that nags at me and to a certain extent still affects me today. It is a conflict between myself and one department head at the company I work for. He criticized and disapproved of my decision to hire an outside consultant to conduct a root- cause analysis, which I chose to do after a disastrous event occurred at the company.

2. The retirement community where I am the Administrator of has a long term care/ nursing home facility. This unit has patients with various forms of dementia. To help keep these residents safe, we have a locked door system that may have been considered ineffective because it did not keep track of who was entering and leaving through the doors, nor did it have a way of identifying such individuals.

However, at the time, we did not anticipate any problems from it.

3. So one day in August last summer, I received a frantic call from one of the nurses at work, who reported that a resident with Alzheimer's was missing from the building. My first priority was to find this lady. I contacted local law enforcement and sent staff to check restaurants, stores, parks, anywhere she might have taken in her mind to visit. Fortunately, we found her only a few hours later. However, this was only the beginning of my problems.

4. When a major event happens like this, the standard procedure that I have always done is to do a "root-cause" analysis. What was the root cause of the issue? What factors led to this event? Since I was not the most skilled at doing a root cause, I brought in an outside consultant to be the leading expert. My reasoning was that she would lend credibility to the process, and I would establish an ethos as a capable manager and leader who was not afraid to ask for help to do what was right. Also, the facility where I was working had never done a root-cause analysis, and I believed that it would be beneficial for them to see the entire process with the help of an expert. That next week I gathered the department heads together with the consultant. However, the event was a disaster. One man refused to speak professionally with her. He demanded to know why we needed to hire anyone. If I suggested that the door system was faulty, he would angrily retort that my staff were poorly trained in keep track of the residents. The consultant tried to be calm and I tried to understand why he was reacting like this, but he created personal-related conflict (Bradford & Cohen, 1998, p.285) by calling her "stupid" and "incompetent". He seemed to need to place the blame on one person, while I was trying to avoid blaming one person. Throughout the whole meeting he was forceful and borderline belligerent. He acted like he felt like he was being attacked. I was humiliated and dumbstruck.

5. In looking back at this event, I have tried to place myself in this man's shoes. Did he feel threatened by me? While I tried to come off as impartial, I may have appeared prejudiced because my first reaction was to defend the staff. Did he feel alienated? I was new to the job, and thus had not developed a strong reputation in this workplace. They did not know how I worked under pressure, and that unknown variable may have scared this gentleman, especially since my boss was not there to back me up (she had to leave a couple of days after the lady was found for a business trip). I also understand that I probably didn't have a comprehensive understanding of the culture at the facility. Months later, I understand it to be a culture where in the case of a problem, someone is often blamed. However, that person who receives full blame for the mistake is pardoned and reaccepted into the workplace immediately. I did not understand that at the time, and I still don't fully understand it now, either. It goes against everything I have been taught, which includes the principle that it's not usually one person's fault, but rather a plethora of factors that contributed to the issue. This man and I had completely different goals. His was probably to find someone to blame, mine was to change a system that I believed was faulty.

To this day, I still have conflicts with him. I feel the issues before me are two fold: 1) I did not understand the organizational culture of the company and 2) We had differing expectations of the type of leadership at this company which led to conflict. The first step to understanding and working through this problem is to understand the culture of my workplace.

Clampitt says that corporate culture is "the underlying belief and value structure of an organization collectively shared by the employees and symbolically expressed in a variety of overt and subtle ways" (2005, p. 47). Part of the reason I was shocked by the man's reaction to my bringing in an expert, was

because I did not fully understand the culture of the company. In the past, they had always looked for one person to blame when something went wrong. That particular mind set reminds me of Forsyth's scapegoat theory, which is an explanation of intergroup conflict suggesting that hostility caused by a frustrating environment is released by taking hostile actions against other social groups (2006, p.459). Forsyth implies that the prejudices that arise from the scapegoat theory are more along the lines of race and ethnicity. At my company, however, the prejudices are more fluid, and the individual blamed is the one with a weakness associated with the issue. For example, the department head that I had conflict with wanted to blame the director of nursing for the problem because the staff "allowed" for the resident's escape. My learning as a leader suggested just the opposite of this; that no one person is to blame and all the factors leading up to the disaster must be analyzed and changed. I also did not understand another part of this company's culture. After the person who was blamed was chastised severely, he or she was soon forgiven and welcomed back into the organization as if nothing had happened. Perhaps the reason for this was the cohesiveness, or unity, within the organization. Forsyth describes group cohesion using Festinger and his colleagues' (Festinger, Schacter, & Back, 1950, p. 164) phrase: "the total field of forces which act on members to remain in the group" (2006, p.137). The individual in the team was punished for messing up (even though the problem was not exclusively his or her fault) but he or she stays in the group. The group strives for unity, or perhaps conflict avoidance, so they accept the other member back. While cohesiveness can be a wonderful thing, it can also inhibit progress. In this case the cohesiveness of the team (their desire to sacrifice one member to preserve the integrity of the group, then reaccepting the individual back) ensured that the true issues were not being dealt with. The group was extremely cohesive, but I was not counted among them yet. I was formally in the group, but I was the minority, and thus lacked the influence that the majority had (Forsyth, 2006). Perhaps the best way to increase my respect within the group was to aim for a structure of shared leadership and find compromise as my role as a leader.

There was a lot of conflict present during the meeting with the expert. Task and role-related conflicts are normal and healthy for a team (Bradford & Cohen, 1998) but the personal-related conflicts that were present during the meeting needed to be identified and halted before they spiraled out of control. In addition to role and task related conflict, there was procedural conflict (Forsyth, 2006, p.425-426) because the department head agreed that something had to be done about the disaster, but he did not think a root cause analysis was the best way to go about it. To make matters worse, the situation escalated out of control because the department head seemed to have lost his temper. Forsyth asserts that "few people can remain calm and collected in a conflict" (2006, p.434) and perhaps an effective way to have mediated the situation was to have calmed the tempers. I feel like one of the roots of this conflict stems from a disagreement about leadership dynamics.

This company did not have an autocratic leadership structure, but they were not quite at the level of shared leadership. Pearce & Conger define shared leadership as "a collaborative, emergent process of group interaction in which members engage in peer leadership while working together" (2003, p.53). Both the department heads and myself thought we were working within the shared leadership idea. I brought in an expert to discuss the issues and work with everyone towards ensuring the disaster never happened again, and my reasoning was to empower the team to work with an expert and not exclusively me. The man I fought with thought I was violating the concept of shared leadership because I did not consult the group before I acted. Post- heroic leadership suggests that the leader consults the group before making major decision (1998, Bradford & Cohen). However, Bradford & Cohen (1998) also recognizes that the ultimate decision rests in the hands of the formal leader of the team. The

decision was mine, but the best way to ensure conflict does not spiral out of control again was to work with the department heads, especially with the one man, to establish a mutual vision (1998, Bradford & Cohen) of my expectations towards them, and their expectations of me.

The intense conflict between the department head and myself was a learning experience. The most important thing I can take from this experience is that I do not know it all. It was shocking and eye opening for me to be involved in a conflict where two intelligent professionals disagree so completely. Even though I tend to be conflict avoidant, I'm starting to see the wisdom in Power Up's words, "conflict is both inevitable and healthy....It should be embraced, not avoided or suppressed....Differing views have to be raised, defended, and questioned" (Bradford & Cohen, 1998, p.275). From now on in my dealings with this man, I'm going to be less conflict avoidant, use conflict to my advantage, but also ensure that the situation does not lead into someone losing their temper or personal attacks being made. I will establish a vision, mutual influence, and an outline of clear expectations. The lessons I can take from this experience can help me grow and learn how to be a better leader in this organization, other places I may work, and in my own personal life.

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